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New representations and politics of procreation: surrogate motherhood, artificial insemination and human cloning in contemporary women’s writing in France

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We’re all remembering and paying tribute to Elizabeth here today, but before reading my paper, I would like above all to remember her generosity and warmth. I first met her when I was a nervous mature postgraduate student at a Society of French Studies conference in Hull in the mid-1990s. When I told her how important her *French Women’s Writing* book had been for introducing me to interesting writers, she gave me a hug. That hug, I felt, welcomed me into my new profession, and Elizabeth remained a warm and encouraging colleague, mentor and friend. Her work and her example continue to inspire me. Indeed, the twin aims of her *French Women’s Writing* book – to widen the pool of texts which are read and studied and to relate women’s writing to a ‘historicised national and cultural production’ (2) underpin my own work on contemporary women’s writing in French and are at the heart of this paper. Underpinning my paper also is Donna Haraway’s point that sex, sexuality and reproduction are central to myth systems that structure our imagination of personal and social possibility in an increasing technoscientific world, and that new stories are part of a critical politics.

My study is at an early stage and very much still work-in-progress. In it, I start to bring together texts dealing with new reproductive technologies and assisted procreation that have been published over the last 15 years. The corpus of literary treatments of this topic is still only small, however, and so this paper is just a beginning. It concentrates on three kinds of procreation: surrogate motherhood, artificial insemination and human reproductive cloning. It aims to provide a brief overview of what is being produced around these themes in France, and in what form, and to ask how the writers and their texts engage with and contribute to contemporary debate.

In 1970, radical US feminist Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* argued that the rise of reproductive technologies represented a potential liberation for women – a liberation from motherhood itself and from its repressive aspects – but that in order to achieve such liberation, women had to take control of the new technologies (in the light of the male domination of other forms of technology). Firestone's 'radical feminist utopia' would entail the demise of the family and marriage, and the rise of single living, polymorphous sexuality, artificial reproduction, and collective households for shared childcare. Forty years later, reproductive technologies are further developed and more widely available than when Firestone was writing, and the debates are somewhat different. They tend to coalesce around questions of ethics and rights, such as: is the 'right to a child' really a right?; who should and should not have access to reproductive technologies or 'assisted procreation'?; what limits should be placed on procreative technology and the so-called 'manufacture' of babies?; or to what extent should a child have the right to know about his or her origins or biological or genetic parentage? Feminist debates have moved from a focus on the legalisation of contraception and abortion to questions of fertility and infertility, and from an

analysis of the repressive nature of motherhood per se to one of different kinds and elements of motherhood. In France, recently reviewed bioethical legislation includes the banning of surrogate pregnancies and the limitation of reproductive technologies to heterosexual couples. *Filiation* is also an important concern in respect of who can or can't be the parent of a child in legal terms. Reproductive technologies and assisted procreation, where the biological parents do not necessarily coincide with the social parents, or which entail multi-parent families, for example, challenge French laws of *filiation*.

I will now look at my literary examples, dealing with the three themes in turn – surrogate motherhood, artificial insemination and human cloning.

Surrogate motherhood

Surrogate motherhood may involve some degree of reproductive technology but it doesn't necessarily have to, since a surrogate pregnancy can of course be achieved by sexual intercourse. Nonetheless, it challenges notions of who or what a mother is, because up to three different women may be involved in the process of mothering: the one whose egg is used, the one who carries the foetus, and another who brings up the child. The argument against legalisation of surrogate pregnancies in France has been lucidly expressed in a polemical defence of its ban by the philosopher, Sylviane Agacinski, published in 2009 at the time of the review of the bioethical laws. She argues that in surrogate pregnancies, a woman's body part is like a machine, the woman exploited and reduced to an incubator, a mother to a gestator. She associates the rental of a woman's uterus with the market in kidneys in the third world, as an assault on human dignity, and draws particular attention to the use of terminology such as 'help for women in distress', 'the gift of life', 'therapeutic aims', 'a treatment

for an infertile couple', which, while emphasising the positive aims of assisted procreation, also contributes to the naturalisation of medical technology in our imaginary.

To date, there is very little in recent French literature on the topic of surrogacy and I have only found two examples. One is a short story – a section – within the novel, *Nativités* by Michèle Gazier about different forms of motherhood, published back in 1995 (immediately after the original law was brought in banning surrogacy). The male narrator has entered into a surrogacy arrangement, because he has always wanted to be a woman and to become a mother (not a father). He intends to register the baby, dressed as a woman and giving the feminised version of his own name as mother, supported by documents that he himself has forged (he's an artist). In this example, the surrogate mother's experience is completely elided, but the story is presented in a light-hearted, fantasy manner which, rather than making a strong political statement *in itself*, serves to increase the multiple representations of contemporary motherhood in the novel, which is, I think, more Gazier's point.

The second example is a more recent novel, *Une fille de feu*, by Emmanuelle Bayamack-Tam, published in 2008. The first-person narrator, Charonne, is a young woman, of unknown but mixed origins. She enters into an arrangement to bear a child for a gay male couple. They inseminate her with the sperm of Daniel, one of the partners (with a syringe), but then she has sex with the other, Arcady, who is bisexual, and to whom she is strongly attracted. When she eventually gets back in touch with them to hand over the baby, she discovers that the couple has split up, Arcady has committed suicide, and Daniel is no longer interested in parenthood. So she keeps her son with whom by now she has a strong bond.

Like Bayamack-Tam's other novels, which commonly give voice to marginal individuals – tramps, drug addicts, transvestites, cross-dressers – this is a surreal, stylised, fantasy text, with larger-than-life characters, and where identities of all kinds are blurred, not just the issue of who or what parents are. Questions about Charonne's ethnic origin form a leitmotif and punctuate the text: 'Tu es kabyle?' (12, 17); 'Tu es kurde?' (17); 'Égyptienne? peul? samoane? vénézuélienne? libanaise?' (17). Charonne herself may even have been the product of artificial insemination but she also has a somewhat unusual parentage in other ways. Her father poses as her aunt throughout her childhood: 'ton père, c'est ta tante' (79), her mother ultimately informs her. And her mother tortures and mutilates (circumcises) her, although miraculously her clitoris somehow grows back: 'Chère communauté scientifique, quitte à ébranler tes certitudes ronronnantes, je souhaite porter à ta connaissance l'incontestable fait suivant: les clitoris repoussent' (133). Charonne oscillates between obesity and anorexia, between hetero- and homosexuality, and her baby is of unknown sex on the scan. In this novel, nothing is what it seems. The text ultimately explores and interrogates imprisonment (by categories, stereotypes) and freedom (through the blurring of categories) through questions of sexuality and gender, race and ethnicity, and the body. In feminist terms, Charonne's trajectory goes from lack of control to more control, as she becomes increasingly confident and independent, but, in contrast to Firestone's vision, and contrary to Agacinski's notion of surrogate motherhood as exploitation, this is achieved *through* motherhood rather than *against* it. Of course, this is partly because the surrogate arrangement falls to pieces of its own accord, but Charonne's increasing agency nonetheless sees her reject her parents who try to regain control of her and her child, and she escapes to freedom with her son.

Artificial insemination

Apart from the last novel discussed, all texts I have found so far dealing with artificial insemination relate to *homoparentalité* – gay and lesbian parenting. Here, there are three examples: two of which – *Mais qui va garder le chat?* by Éliane Girard (2005) and *Family Pride* by Laurence Cinq-Fraix (2006) – portray DIY insemination as in Bayamack-Tam's novel – 'the syringe and yogurt pot method' as one of Girard's characters calls it. Cinq-Fraix's novel tells of a full co-parenting arrangement between a lesbian couple and a gay male couple while Girard's is about a lesbian couple whose gay male friend donates his sperm, but who doesn't want to take on the role of *social* father, although he is happy to be identified (to the child) as his *biological* father.

The third text, by Myriam Blanc, entitled *et elles eurent beaucoup d'enfants...: histoire d'une famille homoparentale* (2005), is the only example I have found so far that portrays *medicalised* artificial insemination by *anonymous* donor. To a great extent, all three examples are primarily concerned with the issues and difficulties around lesbian women and gay men becoming parents. Thus, they include a great deal of discussion about the pros and cons of having a family in the first place, and then about how conception will be achieved and the various options open to them. This is followed by quite a lot of detail of the insemination process, which, in all cases, is not successful first time round – in the first two novels, this is told as a humorous episode, with the two rather embarrassed sets of couples in different rooms and the precious phial of sperm being gingerly transported between them. While the first two texts are fairly conventional novels, with the characters representing character-types and rehearsing different perspectives of the debate around *homoparentalité*, Blanc's is a more hybrid text, part autobiographical journal/memoir,

part fiction, part activist tract, part ‘how to’ manual, with a style that includes humour and slang.

Blanc’s text documents the details of the couple’s road to parenthood. Artificial insemination is not available to lesbians in France, so they have to go to Belgium. It is expensive and difficult, many attempts are required before success, and this procedure is documented in minute detail: locating a suitable hospital, submitting an application, meeting a psychologist, medical examinations, the donor question, frequent delays, ovulation tests, numerous train journeys to Brussels, repeated inseminations, pregnancy tests, blood tests, fertility tests, and then a pregnancy, a scan, followed by a miscarriage and a long period of mourning; then another, this time successful pregnancy, anti-natal clinics, maternity hospitals and the birth – indeed, two births, since both women in the couple give birth at different times. They choose to have two *different* anonymous donors, so that their daughters are not even biologically half-sisters, in an attempt to avoid fantasy constructions of what Blanc calls ‘un “père” mythique’ (51) and claiming that loving mothers and a happy upbringing are more influential than genes in the creation of a family.

The books coincide with a growing amount of sociological and anthropological work in France on *homoparentalité*, and with the rise of activist and lobbying organisations, and other kinds of cultural production around this topic. As contributions to the emerging visibility of *homoparentalité* in France, where the new family forms are still not properly recognised in law (although this is admittedly slowly changing following a series of test cases to obtain shared parental authority), these texts are part of a new politics. As such, they claim both ‘normality’ and ‘difference’ for the families they portray. Overall, the co-mother (the one who does not give birth) probably comes out as the greatest challenge to conventional

understandings of motherhood – since she does not have a ready-made pattern to conform to. The resulting families also represent a return to the extended family, after its fragmentation and demise in the 20c: in *Family Pride*, for example, the child has four parents, eight grandparents and a huge extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins spread throughout France, as well as friends both hetero and gay; and the gay extended family or network is also important in the other two books.

Clones

The corpus on clones consists of two short stories by Marie Darrieussecq in her collection *Zoo* (2006) and a novel by Louise L. Lambrichs, *À ton image* (1998). I don't have time to go into the detail of the short stories here, but suffice to say they are both fantasy tales set in the future and looking back to past medical experiments. In the first, 'Quand je me sens très fatiguée le soir', the clone is a sort of alternative self; the second, 'Mon mari le clône' suggests that a cloned human baby will not grow up to be the same person as its original because generational, environmental, educational and cultural differences intervene – nurture wins over nature here.

In Lambrichs's *À ton image*, the story of cloning is told in retrospect from the perspective of a male narrator, a young obstetrician, who is in prison awaiting trial for rape and murder. His wife, older than him, had become infertile, but, in league with colleagues who are experimenting with cloning, under the guise of medically assisted procreation he secretly arranged for her to be cloned, and she gives birth to this cloned 'daughter'. When, eventually, she finds out the truth, she commits suicide. The daughter grows up rapidly, seemingly faster than normal, becoming, aged 12, for the narrator, a replica of her mother. They have sex, but then her 'father', aghast at what has happened, kills her. However, as a younger man, the narrator also had sex with his

handicapped sister, and then discovered that their father had too. Although the cloned child is not his biological daughter, the repetition of the family secret of incest is implied here. Ironically, his story of cloning is considered too far fetched to be believed at his trial, but rather 'l'affabulation d'un homme désespéré, qui cherche par n'importe quel moyen à justifier son crime' (414).

Lambrichs's novel may thus perhaps be read as a warning of the problematics of reproductive cloning, of the challenge to ethics that human cloning represents: questions that impact on identity, family relations, generations, inheritance. However, inheritance and repetition in family histories are recurrent themes in her novels, along with loss, death, mourning, and questions of guilt, innocence, responsibility and identity; she has also written non-fiction works on medical issues. An important addition to the 2004 edition of the novel is a preface on cloning by the author. On the one hand, it situates her fascination with cloning and doubles in her own family – 'une famille en miroir' (15) – her father was an identical twin, and both brothers had two daughters. On the other, she addresses cloning as a medical advance in procreative technologies. She suggests that the ethical and legal problems with – and the fears surrounding – human cloning lie in the fact that a clone is unthinkable (literally inconceivable) in terms of existing family structures: 'on a affaire à une *filiation indirecte* ou plutôt à une *absence de filiation*, consecutive à une *rupture dans la chaîne générationnelle*' (19). While three elements are required – an ovum, genetic material, and a woman with a womb who will carry and give birth to the resulting child – these can be provided either by different people or by the same one (as in Lambrichs's novel). Who, then, are the parents, if there are any at all?

In the popular imagination, cloning raises spectres of incest (again, as in Lambrichs's novel), madness, fears of men's redundancy in procreation, but also

abuses of genetic engineering and crimes against humanity. However, Lambrichs ultimately argues, more positively, in her preface that human cloning invites society to rethink the relationship between the biological and the social in respect of generation, family relationships, identity and origins. And, yet, in doing so, she suggests, human cloning simply develops further the challenges that reproductive technologies are already issuing and the changes they are already in the process of enabling (as we have seen in the texts on surrogate motherhood and artificial insemination). Cloning would then be a stage on a continuum of assisted procreation, represented here by my three themes.

Conclusion

Apart from the texts on gay and lesbian parenting, which are predominantly realist works, exploring current real-life problematics, the others I have discussed can all be described as fantasies. Although human cloning is still situated in the realms of science fiction, in its practical application if not in its scientific possibility, surrogate motherhood is not, but its representations in French literature in fantasy mode may relate to its outlaw status in France as well as to the marginal kinds of parenthood and identity that the authors concerned are interested in portraying. Indeed, most of the texts discussed deal with issues to do with identity and difference, and gender and sexuality, as much as they do with parenting and new reproductive technologies or assisted procreation. While these authors are clearly responding to contemporary reproductive issues, then, they are also harnessing these issues to explore their own obsessions and interests. But, in doing so, they are nonetheless at the vanguard of a new trend in French literature. Taken together, they form a kind of excess to normative discourses of parenthood and kinship, which troubles and calls into

question the way family relationships are enshrined in French law. As I said at the beginning, this is just a start, and it will be interesting to see how the trend develops over the next few years.